

Bishnupriya Manipuris

By :—

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DEDICATED

TO

Late most revered Tanu Singha— a Bishnupriya Manipuri. He was a brilliant scholar. He stood first in Assam & third in the Calcutta University in the Entrance Examination. From the Presidency College he stood first in Sanskrit Honours in 1902 & also passed English Honours. He was the first graduate amongst the Manipuris including those of Manipur state & second graduate in the undivided Karimganj subdivision of Sylhet district before partition. While studying M.A & Law the services of this brilliant scholar was requisitioned by the Govt. of Assam for the spread of Education in Manipur state. He sacrificed his brilliant career for the sake of Manipur state & went to Manipur in 1903. Most of the Meitheis of Manipur educated during the first two decades of the 20th century were in some or other way indebted to him & Manipur state as a whole was indebted to him for his brilliant services. Let the sacred memory of this noble scholar inspire both the Meithei & Bishnupriya Manipuris.

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P R E F A C E

During Burmese invasion of Manipur there was a great exodus of Manipuris from Manipur. Both Meithei & Bishnupriya Manipuris came in great number & settled in Cachar, Sylhet & Tripura. When the Burmese were turned out of Manipur the Bishnupriya Manipuris who did not join the exodus were bound to adopt gradually the Meithei language of the ruler as a necessity & their language became obsolete in the beginning of the 20th century. Those Bishnupriya Manipuris who during the exodus came to Cachar, Sylhet & Tripura & settled there retained their language & after Indian independence like other minority communities, demanded to educate their children in the primary stage in their own mother tongue. Before this the Meitheis of these areas got sanction to educate their children in their mother tongue ie. Meithei. Now the Meitheis are putting all sorts of obstruction against recognition of Bishnupriya Manipuri language & are trying to isolate these people attributing all possible bad names & trying to lower them in the eyes of other people & in doing so they have gone beyond constitutional means. A Meithei leader like Sri N. Tombi M.P. in his book 'Manipur a Study' in a way said that Bishnupriyas are not Manipuris though he admits

that the Bishnupriyas who did not join the exodus & remained in Manipur are Manipuris. He agrees to absorb the Bishnupriyas if they adopt Meithei language. This is absurd. Tribals of Manipur, Hindus, Muslims & Lairikyéngbama (Bengali clerks) of Manipur & their descendents are all Manipuris. This cannot be otherwise in case of Bishnupriya Manipuris.

Religion & culture of Bishnupriyas are the same as those of the Meitheis ; the difference is only in language. Meitheis have got a state in the Indian Union & so they are in a better position to advance in their culture & religion. Bishnupriyas will be bound to learn Meithei language in order to keep pace with the progress in culture & religion even if they retain their mother tongue. I appeal to both sides to think in cool heads over the matter & refrain from suicidal struggles. Are not Hindusthanis, Punjabis, Marathis, Madrasis, Oriyas, Beharis, Bengalis, Assamese & Manipuris all Indians though they have different languages ? I also appeal to the Chief Minister of Manipur to rise above sect feelings & help to do justice to the Bishnupriya Manipuris who migrated from Manipur ?

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BISHNUPRIYA MANIPURIS

Manipuris consist of two main sections Meitheis & Bishnupriys. The Meithei Manipuris originally consisted of a single clan known as Ningthouza. But gradually they conquered Khumal, Moirang Angom, Luang & khaba Nangba clans of Manipur & they ruled the whole of Manipur. Bishnupriya Manipurics consisted of Manipuris who inhabited Bishnupur area which extended beyond Ningthougong in the south & upto Logtak Lake including Ngaikhong & other villages in the east and & they also included Khumals Moirangs, Angoms, Luangs & Khatriyas of Western India who came to Manipur from time to time from prehistoric days & inhabited in this area. Prof. Jyotirmoy Roy has narrated a short account of Kshatriyas coming to Manipur from Western India from time to time in his book 'Manipurer Itihas'. According to Col. Gerini a branch of the Kalingas in the third century B.C. went through Sylhet, Manipur & Kobo Valley upto Western Burma area. He also mentions that Dhawajaraj—a prince of Shakya dynasty came to Manipur in 550 B.C. & settled there. Sir James Johnstone, Capt. Dunn—Western historians state that different branches of Aryans came to Manipur from prehistoric days & settled there.

Manipur & Bishnupur are terms of the Aryans. The Meitheis call Manipur as Meithei Laipak & Bishnupur as Lamhangdong. Bishnupur is just the gate to Manipur from the west. The meaning of the Meithei term is 'gate to plane area (of Manipur)' Bishnupur covers a large area which extended beyond Ningthoungong in the south & upto Logtak Lake in the east. Bishnupur proper was previously thickly populated area like a town & Sri L. Ibungohal Singh in his 'Introduction to Manipur (p. 31) mentions that a brick temple of Bishnu was erected by the king Kyamba in the city of Bishnupur in 1404 shak & it is still in existence. It was the capital of king Kyamba & it was shifted to the north eastern part of the valley afterwards vide Sri N. Tombi's 'Manipur a study' (p. 73). It was also the capital of Raja Gambhir Singh vide Sri Gunendra Singh's 'Manipur Itihas' Part 3, p. 96).

The Manipur Valley north of Logtak Lake was under water & it is admitted by many historians including Meithei historians. It is also admitted by the Meithei historians that the Meitheis previously lived in Kowbru hills in the north-west of Manipur & when the northern valley appeared they came down from the hills & settled in the valley. When the northern valley was under water, plane area of Manipur consisted of areas on the west, south & east of

Logtak Lake. Outsiders of the west, who came to Manipur settled generally in Bishnupur areas extending beyond Ningthoungong & Moirang. Those who went to Kabo Valley, Burma & Eastern Asia, passed through Bishnupur & Moirang etc. Those who settled in Manipur mixed with the natives & their language & culture were also mixed up with those of the natives.

At Ningthoungong lived the head or Piba of Khumal clan & it is mentioned by English Historians'. Robes & silk garments & other relics of Khamba & Thoibi are still preserved by a Moirang family at Ningthoungong with Sanctity. Some members of this family left Manipur during the exodus & their descendants are now living in Cachar as Bishnupriya Manipuris. With the formation of the northern valley some people on the west, south & east of Logtak Lake also moved to the new valley & settled there. The Meitheis gradually grew stronger & subdued all other clans & hill tribes & became the ruler of Meithei Leipak ie. Manipur & all other clans began to adopt Meithei language & culture. When Garib Nowaj, a Manipur Ruler, adopted Gauriya Baishnab religion many Meitheis & members of other clans also adopted the religion & during Rajarshi Bhagyachandra the rest of the Manipuris, except those Meitheis who preferred to retain their old traditional

religion, became Gauriya Baishnabs. Bishnupriyas including the Ningthougong people also adopted Gauriya Baishnab religion & they began to adopt Meithei language & Meithei culture gradually. Those who did not join the exodus are compelled to adopt Meithei language & culture as a necessity but they still retained their Bishnupriya language till the time when Mr. Grieson compiled the Linguistic Survey of India. That Ningthougong people used to speak Bishnupriya is proved by the fact that a story told by a Bishnupriya at Ningthougong is found in Grieson's book. After some years Bishnupriya Manipuri language became obsolete in Manipur though Ningthougong people still feel proud to call themselves Bishnupriya Manipuris.

Meithei historians claim that Bishnu was worshipped by the Meitheis from the prehistoric days of Babrubahan. Sri L. Ibungohat in his *Introductions to Manipur* (p. 31) Says "Bishnu Image has been in Manipur as the family God of the ruling princes from the prehistoric days. The king of Pong the flourishing state in the upper Burmah took it away as the war trophy when he conquered Manipur. Khukhemba-king of Pong & Kyamba-king of Manipur became friends & the Bishnu Chakra was returned to the king of Manipur but it is not clear in what form it was worshipped before 1467 shak.

Sri Atombapu Bidyaratna in his article 'Bishnupur' in the monthly paper 'Manipur' (1st year 19th august 1934 Part 12 p.p 454, 455) writes that King Kyamba after receiving the Bishnudise from the king of Pong kept it in a bettlenut case. He was told repeatedly in dreams that there were Brahmins in his state. He should find out one of them, get 'Kshir' prepared with milk and offer it to Bishnu after puja. If he did so he would be cured of his ailment. After consulting his ministers he sent out his men and made a frantic search of the Brahmins in his state. One Brahmin named Bhanu Narayan was found out at Ngai Khong a Bisnupriya village (in Bishnupur area). This Brahmin performed puja of Bishnu by offering Tulsi leaves etc and Kshir prepared with milk and prasad was given to the king and he was cured of his ailment. Here Sri Gunendra Singha, the writer of 'Manipur Itihas—Meithei Puran' mentions that the king and his Meithei people did not know what was Tulsi, what was Jala-Sankha and how to prepare Kshir with milk for offering to Bishnu (p 13 Manipur Itihas part II).

Sri N. Tambi in his book 'Manipur a Study' a well written book excepting a portion which will be mentioned afterwords, states (vide : p. 73) that Khagenba king (it should be Kyamba, vide Ibango ha's book and

Gunendra Singha's book) was in frantic search for men from accross the western border to help preparation of Kshir (rice cooked in milk with suger and testy ingradient) for Bishnu deity . He also mentions that at the time of installation of Bishnu 500 years ago some of the Bishnupriyas might have been brought by some king and allowed to settle in Manipur. It appears the number expanded in Manipur even after the king shifted his capital to the North-eastern part of the valley. It appears from this that the king's capital was at that time at Lamhangdong (Bishnupur) and it was necessarily a thickly populated area like a town as mentioned by Sri L. Ibungahal in his 'Introduction to Manipur' p 62.

Being connected with worshipping of Bishnu some of the Meitheis disliked the better position of the Bishnupriyas in the eyes of the king. At the time of initiation to Gouriya Baishnabism also Meitheis in general were made to take mass ablution in water as 'Prayaschitta' but Bishnupriyas were not asked to do this and they were initiated directly as they were worshippers of Bishnu already. This was resented to by the Meitheis and some of them tried to insult them by calling them 'Kalisa' meaning beast for sacrifice to Goddess Kali. Some of the Bishnupriyas also returned it by calling them 'Akoksa' meaning beasts coming down to

cleared areas. In fact there are no people or clans called 'Kalisa' or 'Akoksa'. These were mere terms for insulting each other.

Sri Gunendra Singha in his Manipur Itihas states that Khagenba Raja of Manipur defeated the Kachari king near Bishnupur and some Sudra Kalisas, Brahmins and Muslims were made captives. He allowed the Sudra Kalisas to settle at Bishnupur. They were, he mentions Shaktas and Manipur king compelled them to be converted to Hinduism. As they were settled at Bishnupur they were called Bishnupuriyas (vide : Manipur Itihas Part III, p 32). If they were Saktas they were already Hindus and there is no sense in stating that the king compelled them to be Hindus. According to Sr. N. Tambi Bishnupuriyas were brought by some king to help in Bishnupuja. So Bishnupuriyas could not be Saktas and Sudras as stated by Sri Gunendra Singha.

Sri Mutum Jhulan Singha says in his Bijoy Panchali (p. 71) that there was a big fight between Raja Khagendra Singha and Sanowton who was helped by Kachari king. Khagendra Raja killed Senowton and defeated Kachari king and took possession of 800 elephants, 100 guns and made 2000 captives consisting of Hindus and Muslims. These Hindus were settled at Bishnupur and were termed as Bishnupuriyas and Muslims were settled at Lilong.

Bishnupur was already a thickly populated area as mentioned previously, being the capital of Manipur—If these newly settled people were called Bishnupuriys as they lived at Bishnupur those who already lived there before them were also Bishnupriyas.

Sri Matam Jhulan Singha also mentions in the said book (pages 53-54) that Khuma king defeated the Meitei king Yaraba (871 shak) and ruled Manipur for a period and made his capital at Mayang Imphal. Because Mayang Kalisas made this Khumal Palace so the Khumal Palace is called Mayang Impham. From this it appears that these so called Mayang Kalisas were in Manipur in the 9th century shak according to him. It is curious to know that a palace was named after the labourers which is absurd. This name Kalisa again appears in Sri Gunendra Singha's Manipur Itihas Meitei Pura after 800 years in the 16th century shak. When king Khagendra Singha defeated Kachari king, Head or Piba of Khumals and the Khumals in Ningthoungong and Bishnupur areas preferred to call themselves Bishnupriyas and some Meiteis used to insult these Bishnupriyas as Mayang Kalisa and termed the Capital of Khumel king as Mayang Impham. Actually it is Mayang Imphal which means that it is some where in the middle of old capital Bishnupur and present capital Imphal.

Mayang means a Hindu foreigner of the west of Manipur.

Rajarshi Bhagyachandra in order to remove this wrong idea of some people against the Bishnupriyas married a Bishnupriya maiden at Ningthaugong and had a son named Kalaraja. When he installed the deity Sri Gobindajew he sent the Bagraha of Sri Gopinath, carved out of the same jack-fruit tree with which the Bagraha of Sri Gobindajew was made, to his son Kalaraja for worshipping at Ningthaugong and sufficient land was also granted as Devottar for the deity Sri Gopinath. During the great exodus of Manipuris from Manipur due to Burmese invasion and atrocities the Bagrahas of Sri Gobindajew and Sri Gopinath were taken to Sylhet and when Gombhir Singha & Narsingha defeated the Burmese and reoccupied Manipur and made his capital at Bishnupur, Raja Gombhir Singha took Kalaraja with him and brought the deities of Sri Gobindajew and Gopinath from Sylhet (vide : p p 97 & 98 of Manipur Itihas Part III, 7th Chap. of Gunendra Singha).

During the Burmese invasion of Manipur a large number of Manipuris including Meitheis Bishnupriyas, Sudra Lairik yengboms (Bengali clerks and their relatives) and Mustims fled to Cachar, Sylhet and Tripura and stilled there. Before this exodus all Hindu Manipuris became Gauriya Baishnabs excepting those Meitheis who preferred

to retain their traditional Meithei religion. All Bishnupriya Manipuris also became Gouriya Baishnabs and began to adopt Meithei language as it became more & more important being the court language & language taught in schools. They however retained their own language also & during the beginning of the 20th century A. D. we find in Mr Grierson's volume of Linguistic survey of India a story of Bishnupriya language taken from a Bishnupriya at Ningthoung. After that this language gradually became obsolete in Manipur. The Bishnupriya Manipuris who did not join the exodus but preferred to remain in Manipur, though gradually adopted the Meithei language, they are still proud to call themselves as Bishnupriya Manipuris & they still retain connection with the relatives in Cachar, Sylhet & Tripura. Descendants of Kalaraja who are at Ningthoung in Manipur have still close connection with those descendants of Kalaraja who joined the exodus.

Sri N. Tambi has stated in his book that Bishnupriya language looks like more deformed Bengali than Meithei. It is not known how & where Sri Tambi learned this language to enable him to form an opinion. There are so many peculiarities in this language which can not be found in any other language in eastern India. It is not a place for discussing such matters but only one instance may suffice

to mention here that Bishnupriya verbs have both number & gender which can not be found in Bengali nor in Assamese. It is found only in Hindusthani

Sri Tombi is very reasonable in dealing with minorities such as Hill tribes, Muslims & Sudra Laitik yengbombs, But in case of Manipuri Bishnupriys, who migrated from Manipur during Burmese invasion, he seems to be very unreasonable. He is not prepared to call them even Manipuris & what is the reason? Because they do not give up their language & adopt the Meithei language. If there had been no exodus from Manipur, Manipuri Bishnupriyas would have as a necessity, adopted the Meithei language as their brethren who did not join the exodus. But when they settled in Cachar, Sylhet & Tripura fortunately or unfortunately they retained their own language & developed their mother tongue as there was no obstacles from any side & there was no inconvenience whatsoever. Their number was not insignificant. At present though the Meitheis are in majority in Silchar & Hailakandi subdivisions, Bishnupriyas are in majority in Karimganj subdivision of Cachar district & also in Sylhet & Tripura. But Bishnupriya Manipuris are definitely in minority if the population of Manipur state is taken into consideration. Sri Tombi states that Bishnupriyas who are now in Manipur are

Manipuris but their kith & kins who came from Manipur during the exodus are not Manipuris.

After independance minorities began to claim to educate their children in their own mother tongue upto primary stage & Manipur Bishnupriyas, who have a distinct language of their own, moved Govt. for the benefit. Sri N. Tombi was misinformed about it & so he says that due to the agitation of the Bishnupriya Manipuris Govts. of Assam & Tripura are in the apparent grip of a claim & counter claim put up by Meithei & Bishnupriya Manipuris as to whose language should be recognised by the Govt. as Manipuri. This is not at all the case Bishnupriya Manipuris never claimed that Meithei language is not Manipuri language. They never put any objection to Meithei language being recognised by Govt. or university as Manipuri language as this Meithei language is the state Manipuri language prevailing now in Manipur valley. Perhaps our Cachar & Tripura Meithei friends might have given this wrong information to Sri N. Tombi.

According to Sri N. Tombi Bengal, Sylhet & Cachar Muslims & Bengali Sudra Hindus who went to Manipur & settled there & spoke in Meithei language, but during the exodus due to Burmese invasion left Manipur, are all Manipurians but Bishnupriya Manipuris who were permanent

residents in Manipur from prehistoric days & joined the exodus & settled in Cachar, Sylhet & Tripura are not Manipuris as they have not abandoned their own language & adopted Meithei language. He has advised them that if they even now adopt Meithei language they will be considered as Manipuris. This is nice logic of a politician like Sri N. Tombi. Descendents of Kalaraja, son of Rajarshi Bhagyachandra of Manipur, descendents of Khumal kings & Moirang families who preserved the relics of Khamba & Thoibi of Manipur & who migrated to Cachar, Sylhet & Tripura during the exodus & settled there & who as in Manipur regarded themselves as Bishnupriya Manipuris are not Manipuris according to logic of Sri N. Tombi who seems to be reasonable towards all minorities of Manipur except the Bishnupriya Manipuris. The religion & culture of the Bishnupriya Manipuris & the Meithei's are the same & they are Kshatriyas, only the difference is in their language. As the Meitheis are definitely in majority & as they got a separate state in India they will be surely more advanced in developing their language, culture & religion. Bishnupriya Manipuris being in minority & having the same culture & religion with the Meitheis will be bound to follow the Meitheis to develop the religion & culture & in doing so they will be compelled to learn the Meithei language also.

But is not it impossible to compell them to abandon their language & adopt the Meithei language in these days of democracy where minorities' rights are protected.

Prof. Jyotirmoy Rai's 'Manipur Itihas' is highly praised by Prof. Minaketan Singha of Dhana Manjuri College of Manipur. In this book at page 309 he states that in Manipur the Meitheis are Kshatriyas. Amongst the Kshatriys there is another section called Bishnupriya. Sri N Tombi also admits that Rajarsi Bhagyachandra married a Bishnupriya maiden at Ningthougong in manipur. How can he say that if the Bishnupriyas do not adopt Meithei language they are not Manipuris? Are not the Punjabis, Hindusthanis, Beharis, Madrasis, Oriyas, Bengalis, Assamise & Manipuris all Indians though they have different languages? If that be so why Sri N. Tombi is so unreasonable towards the Bishnupria Manipuirs?

The writer is not a supporter of Manipuri children whether Meithei or Bishnupriya living outside Manipur to be educated in their monther tongue as that will hamper ultimately the progress of education of these children. But this is a day of majority. Individual opinion, however reasonable it might be does not count at all.

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